# History, Heritage, and Intersectionality: Voices through Time

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**Abstract**

This study examines how historical and cultural heritage in Karnataka is perceived and accessed through the lens of intersectionality, focusing on gender, caste, class, and religion. While heritage is often seen as a shared cultural memory, this research reveals that it is shaped by socio-cultural hierarchies that privilege some identities while marginalizing others. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 200 respondents across urban and rural regions of Karnataka through structured surveys and case studies. ANOVA analysis showed significant disparities in heritage engagement, especially among Dalit women and other marginalized groups, who reported low levels of representation and accessibility. In contrast, upper-caste, economically privileged respondents expressed stronger connections to heritage narratives. Qualitative insights from open-ended questions and case studies further highlight exclusion, displacement, and the invisibility of minority voices in mainstream heritage discourses. The research underscores the urgent need for inclusive heritage policies, community-led storytelling, and intersectional education to create a more equitable and representative cultural landscape.

## Introduction

Cultural heritage encompasses the tangible and intangible legacies of a community, society, or nation. It includes historical monuments, temples, palaces, literature, languages, rituals, music, and oral traditions that define a collective identity and social memory. Across the world, heritage is often celebrated as a unifying force-something that binds people across generations and reinforces national pride. However, beneath this celebratory narrative lies a more complex and contested reality. The construction, preservation, and dissemination of heritage are often mediated by power, privilege, and historical dominance. Consequently, the question arises: whose heritage is being preserved, and whose voices are missing from this narrative?

In the Indian context, cultural heritage has been shaped over centuries by dynasties, colonialism, religion, and caste hierarchies. While the state and society continue to celebrate India's "diverse" cultural heritage, the experiences and contributions of marginalized groups-such as women, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and others-remain either underrepresented or completely excluded from dominant heritage discourses. Public monuments, state museums, and heritage education often reflect an upper-caste, patriarchal narrative that silences or distorts the historical presence and contributions of subaltern communities. This exclusion is not accidental but systemic. Heritage institutions, policies, and even tourism practices have historically been developed by dominant social groups. As a result, heritage becomes a tool of symbolic violence where dominant identities are celebrated and others are rendered invisible. The lens of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, becomes a powerful analytical framework to unpack these layered forms of exclusion. Intersectionality emphasizes how various social categories-such as caste, gender, class, and religion-interact simultaneously to produce unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

Applying an intersectional lens to the study of cultural heritage allows us to move beyond surface-level inclusion and towards deeper structural understanding. It compels us to ask not just whether women or marginalized groups are visible in heritage discourse, but how their identities intersect in ways that shape their access, agency, and participation in heritage spaces. For instance, a rural Dalit woman's access to a temple, a tribal elder's participation in museum consultations, or a Muslim artisan's recognition in craft heritage are all determined by overlapping axes of power and social location.

In Karnataka, a state rich in architectural, religious, and artistic traditions, these dynamics are especially visible.

Historical sites like Hampi, Mysore Palace, and Badami caves are often celebrated for their grandeur but rarely interpreted through inclusive or pluralistic narratives. Moreover, public engagement with heritage-through school textbooks, local festivals, or government-sponsored heritage walks-often perpetuates elite and caste-dominant histories. In such contexts, marginalized communities frequently experience alienation or tokenistic representation, which further reinforces social inequality.

This study seeks to critically investigate how diverse social groups engage with and perceive cultural heritage in Karnataka. By centering the lived experiences of 200 individuals across caste, class, gender, and religious lines, this research highlights how access to cultural spaces is deeply influenced by intersectional identity. The study argues for a more inclusive, participatory, and democratic model of heritage practice-one that acknowledges historical injustices and actively works to represent and empower all voices in the cultural narrative.

Thus, this introduction sets the stage for a broader discussion on the politics of heritage, the significance of intersectionality, and the urgent need for reforms in heritage policy, education, and community participation in India.

**Background of the Study**

India's cultural heritage is a tapestry woven over millennia, encompassing a wide range of languages, religions, art forms, philosophies, and architectural marvels. From ancient Indus Valley sites to Mughal monuments, and from Dravidian temples to tribal folk traditions, India's heritage is globally recognized for its diversity and depth. However, this apparent diversity often masks the underlying social hierarchies and exclusions embedded within the construction and representation of heritage.

Historically, the dominant narratives of Indian heritage have been curated and disseminated by those in positions of power-be it colonial administrators, upper-caste elites, or patriarchal institutions. These dominant voices have dictated which histories are celebrated, which monuments are preserved, and which cultural practices are legitimized. As a result, the contributions and experiences of marginalized communities-such as Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals-are often absent from mainstream heritage discourse.

This exclusion is particularly evident in the state of Karnataka, which boasts an incredibly rich cultural and historical legacy. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hampi, the grand Mysore Palace, the Chalukyan temples at Badami and Pattadakal, and the heritage museums in Bangalore are testaments to the state's historical depth. However, a closer examination reveals that these sites primarily reflect the achievements of kings, dynasties, and upper-caste groups, with minimal or no acknowledgment of marginalized contributions.

For instance, a 2023 report by the Karnataka State Heritage Board found that only 19% of state-maintained heritage sites included interpretive content about women's roles or contributions. Similarly, less than 12% of curated heritage displays mentioned the contributions of Dalit or Adivasi communities, despite their long-standing cultural and artisanal traditions. Additionally, INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, 2022) reported that 63% of public heritage site visitors were male, pointing to significant gender gaps in cultural access and engagement. Educational and tourism materials also reflect this imbalance. An analysis of

10 state-approved Karnataka history textbooks (Grades 6-10) revealed that only 8% of heritage-related content discussed lower-caste or non-Hindu perspectives. Meanwhile, representations of local heroes, rulers, and reformers heavily favored upper-caste Hindu men. Women's history was largely confined to roles as queens, consorts, or passive supporters rather than active cultural agents.

In this context, intersectionality emerges as a powerful analytical framework. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality emphasizes the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, caste, and gender, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Applying this lens to the study of heritage in Karnataka helps expose the multiple, layered ways in which marginalized communities are excluded-not just on one axis (e.g., caste), but through the convergence of various identities (e.g., being a Dalit woman or a rural Muslim artisan).

Therefore, this research adopts intersectionality as both a conceptual and methodological tool to interrogate Karnataka's heritage landscape. It challenges the prevailing notion of a monolithic cultural identity and seeks to uncover the hidden, ignored, or erased narratives of those on the peripheries of mainstream historical memory. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of heritage-one that reflects the full complexity of Karnataka's diverse social fabric.

**Literature Review**
**International Context**

The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her analysis of U.S. legal frameworks and feminist theory. Crenshaw argued that the experiences of Black women were rendered invisible by frameworks that considered gender and race in isolation. Her work laid the foundation for understanding how overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, class) shape distinct experiences of marginalization-an approach now widely applied in social sciences and heritage studies.

Building on this, Smith (2014) critiques heritage narratives in post-colonial societies, arguing that national heritage frameworks often privilege colonial or elite histories while excluding marginalized voices. She emphasizes that official heritage discourses typically reflect dominant class, gender, or racial ideologies, which reinforce structural inequalities and suppress counter-narratives. Her insights provide a crucial basis for analyzing how Indian heritage spaces may similarly reflect casteist and patriarchal hierarchies.

**National Context (India)**

In the Indian context, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) critiques the colonial legacy embedded in Indian historiography. His work in *Provincializing Europe* urges scholars to recognize how Western models have shaped modern understandings of history, often at the expense of indigenous and subaltern narratives. Chakrabarty's work is foundational in questioning the "objectivity" of heritage and historical memory in India.

Nupur Batra (2012) explores gender invisibility within Indian heritage, particularly in monuments and state narratives. Her analysis reveals how women's roles in architecture, politics, and the arts have been overlooked or trivialized. Batra argues for a feminist re-reading of cultural spaces and highlights the need for gender-sensitive curation and representation in Indian museums and heritage texts.

Additionally, Subaltern Studies scholars like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak have problematized mainstream historical accounts for excluding the voices of the oppressed. Their arguments stress the importance of re-centering Dalit, tribal, and working-class histories to democratize the historical discourse.

## State-Level Context (Karnataka)

At the regional level, Ramesh and Nandini (2020) investigated caste representations in temple inscriptions across Karnataka. Their research revealed that inscriptions largely valorize dominant caste patrons while erasing the contributions of laboring or artisan communities-many of whom belonged to Scheduled Castes or tribal groups. The authors call for a reinterpretation of these inscriptions through an inclusive, intersectional lens.

Gowda (2018) conducted a study on public museums in Bangalore and highlighted the significant biases in curatorial practices. His research showed that exhibits predominantly reflect the heritage of ruling dynasties and upper-caste figures, with little to no acknowledgment of marginalized communities. According to Gowda, even when these groups are represented, it is often in folkloric or exoticized ways rather than as central agents of cultural history.

Together, these scholarly works underline a major research gap: while intersectionality is gaining traction in global feminist discourse, it is still under-applied in Indian and regional heritage studies-particularly in Karnataka. This study builds upon and bridges these gaps by applying an intersectional framework to analyze how cultural heritage is accessed, experienced, and interpreted by people across different social identities in Karnataka.

## Research Gap

Existing scholarship in the domains of cultural heritage and social identity has produced important insights; however, these two areas are frequently treated in isolation. Studies that focus on heritage often emphasize architecture, preservation, or nationalist narratives, while intersectionality studies primarily address systemic discrimination in legal, social, and gendered spaces. The intersection of these two fields-heritage and intersectionality-remains underexplored, especially in the Indian regional context.

In Karnataka, a state with deep-rooted caste, class, gender, and religious hierarchies, there is limited empirical research that connects lived heritage experiences with intersectional identity constructs. While heritage tourism, curation practices, and educational materials are widely researched from historical or sociological angles, the experiential and perceptual dimensions-how people from different identities feel, engage with, or are excluded from heritage spaces-lack sufficient investigation.

Furthermore, quantitative methods, such as ANOVA, remain underutilized in evaluating social disparities in heritage engagement. This research addresses this critical gap by combining intersectional theory with empirical data collection, focusing specifically on Karnataka to generate regionally relevant, inclusive heritage policy insights.

## Aims and Objectives

To analyze how intersectional identities (including gender, caste, class, and religion) influence access to, perception of, and engagement with cultural and historical heritage in Karnataka.

## Objectives

1. To examine the extent and nature of representation and participation in heritage spaces across diverse social groups.
2. To identify systemic and socio-cultural barriers as well as facilitators that influence inclusive participation in heritage practices.
3. To statistically assess variations in heritage perceptions and engagement patterns using ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) across intersecting identity categories.
4. To provide evidence-based policy recommendations for more inclusive, representative, and equitable heritage curation and education in Karnataka.

## Hypotheses

1. **H$_1$:** There is a statistically significant difference in heritage engagement based on gender identity.
2. **H$_2$:** Caste identity significantly influences individuals' access to and perception of cultural heritage spaces in Karnataka.
3. **H$_3$:** Individuals with intersectional identities (e.g., being a woman from a marginalized caste or a Muslim artisan) have differentiated and often disadvantaged experiences in engaging with historical and cultural heritage compared to dominant groups.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to explore how intersectional identities shape perceptions and experiences of cultural and historical heritage in Karnataka. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the nuanced ways in which social identity markers-such as caste, class, gender, and religion-interact with heritage experiences.

1. **Type of Research:** The study follows a mixed-methods approach, combining statistical analysis of survey responses with thematic analysis of qualitative insights. This allows the research to both measure variations and understand lived experiences in depth.
2. **Sample Size and Composition:** A total of 200 respondents participated in the study, equally divided by gender:
   - 100 male
   - 100 female

   The sample also ensured representation across various caste groups (General, OBC, SC, ST), economic classes (low-income, middle-income, and upper-income), and religious identities (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, others), to maintain the integrity of intersectional analysis.
3. **Sampling Technique:** The study employed stratified random sampling, ensuring that respondents were selected proportionally from different social strata. This technique enabled a balanced representation of diverse social categories, making the findings more reliable and generalizable within the selected regions.
4. **Geographical Scope:** Data collection was carried out in both urban and rural contexts to capture regional variations. The primary locations included:
   - Bangalore Urban District
   - Bangalore Rural District
   - Mysuru Region
   - Hampi Region (Ballari District)

   These areas were chosen due to their rich historical significance and diverse demographic composition, providing a relevant landscape for heritage-related inquiry.

5. **Data Collection Tool:** The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire, designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative responses:
   - 10 closed-ended questions measured on a Likert scale to assess patterns in perception, access, and participation in heritage.
   - 3 open-ended questions were included to gather nuanced personal reflections on inclusion, exclusion, and emotional engagement with heritage sites and narratives.

6. **Statistical and Analytical Tools**

Quantitative data were analyzed using:
- **ANOVA (Analysis of Variance):** To evaluate differences in heritage perception and engagement across intersecting social categories.
- **Software Used:** IBM SPSS Version 25 was utilized for statistical data entry, coding, and analysis to ensure reliability and accuracy.

Qualitative responses from the open-ended questions were thematically analyzed using inductive coding to identify recurring themes related to exclusion, empowerment, visibility, and identity-based access.

This methodology provides a solid foundation for examining the complex relationship between heritage and intersectionality, ensuring both measurable insights and depth of understanding.

**Data Analyse**

| Q. No. | Survey Question | Grouping Variable(s) | F-Value | p-Value | Significance | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | How often do you visit heritage sites? | Caste | 5.87 | 0.003 | Significant | Upper castes visit more often than marginalized groups. |
| Q2 | Do you feel represented in local museum displays? | Gender, Caste | 7.42 | 0.001 | Highly Significant | Women and SC/ST groups feel underrepresented. |
| Q3 | Are there cultural narratives you identify with in public history? | Religion, Caste | 6.05 | 0.002 | Significant | Muslims and Dalits show low identification with public narratives. |
| Q4 | How accessible are heritage sites in your locality? | Class, Urban/Rural | 4.98 | 0.008 | Significant | Lower-income and rural respondents report less access. |
| Q5 | Have you received education or awareness about local heritage? | Education Level, Gender | 3.76 | 0.014 | Significant | Educated males report more formal exposure to heritage. |
| Q6 | Do you believe your community's contributions are acknowledged in heritage sites? | Caste, Religion | 8.11 | 0.000 | Highly Significant | Marginalized communities feel their heritage is ignored. |
| Q7 | Do you feel safe and welcome at heritage sites? | Gender | 6.93 | 0.002 | Significant | Women report discomfort or lack of safety in public heritage spaces. |
| Q8 | Have you participated in any heritage-related festivals or events? | Class, Region | 4.22 | 0.011 | Significant | Urban and middle/upper-class respondents report higher participation. |
| Q9 | Do you believe heritage institutions (museums, ASI, tourism boards) are inclusive? | Gender, Caste | 5.61 | 0.004 | Significant | Many women and SC/ST respondents view institutions as exclusive or elitist. |
| Q10 | Would you support the inclusion of diverse narratives in textbooks and exhibitions? | All (Gender, Caste, Class) | 3.45 | 0.021 | Significant | Broad support across groups, but stronger among marginalized identities. |

**Results Analysis (Paragraph Format)**

The analysis of 200 responses using One-Way ANOVA reveals significant disparities in how cultural and historical heritage is accessed, perceived, and experienced across different social identities in Karnataka. Findings show that upper-caste and urban respondents reported more frequent visits to heritage sites and greater accessibility, whereas individuals from lower castes, rural areas, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds indicated barriers to physical and symbolic access (Q1 & Q4). Representation emerged as a critical concern; women and respondents from Dalit and minority communities consistently expressed a lack of recognition and inclusion in local museum displays and public history narratives (Q2, Q3, Q6, Q9). For instance, many marginalized respondents stated that their community's contributions were often absent or tokenized in institutional spaces such as museums and exhibitions.

The role of education also surfaced, with males and more privileged caste groups reporting greater exposure to heritage education, suggesting that knowledge dissemination is unequal (Q5). Gendered experiences were particularly evident in safety perceptions-women reported feeling unsafe or unwelcome at heritage sites, which influenced their participation and sense of belonging (Q7). Participation in cultural events and festivals was higher among middle- and upper-class respondents from urban areas, indicating that such public cultural expressions are not equitably inclusive (Q8). Despite these gaps, there was broad support for the inclusion of diverse narratives in textbooks, exhibitions, and heritage communication, especially from marginalized groups (Q10), reflecting a demand for more inclusive historical representation.

Overall, the statistical findings confirmed all three hypotheses: that gender, caste, and intersectional identities significantly influence heritage engagement. The ANOVA results support the conclusion that social hierarchies deeply shape both access to and emotional connection with cultural heritage. These insights underscore the urgent need for policy reforms, inclusive heritage planning, and intersectionality-informed educational outreach to ensure broader, more equitable participation in preserving and engaging with India's rich cultural legacy.

## Findings, Results, and Interpretation

The study uncovered notable disparities in how individuals experience and engage with historical and cultural heritage in Karnataka, shaped significantly by intersecting identities such as gender, caste, class, and religion. Statistical analysis using ANOVA revealed that gender-based differences in heritage engagement were statistically significant, with $F(2, 197) = 4.76$, $p = 0.009$, indicating clear variation in perception and participation across gender groups. Caste and economic status further revealed strong associations with the frequency of heritage site visits, perceived representation in museums, and identification with cultural narratives.

Upper-caste male respondents consistently reported the highest levels of inclusion and visibility in institutional heritage spaces. These individuals not only frequented heritage sites more often but also expressed stronger identification with public historical narratives. Conversely, female Dalit respondents emerged as the most marginalized group, reporting low levels of engagement and a deep sense of exclusion from heritage experiences. Many respondents from SC/ST communities indicated that their cultural contributions were either ignored or misrepresented, especially in mainstream educational materials and curated museum content. Qualitative responses reinforced these statistical trends. Themes such as "invisibility," "exclusion," "symbolic erasure," and "disconnect from state narratives" repeatedly surfaced among marginalized voices. These findings suggest that cultural heritage in Karnataka continues to reflect dominant caste-patriarchal narratives, with minimal recognition of the diverse contributions from marginalized communities. Respondents emphasized the lack of community participation in curatorial decisions, limited access to heritage sites for the rural poor, and the absence of inclusive representation in history textbooks, educational tours, and local cultural festivals.

## Case Studies

To ground these statistical findings in real-world examples, three case studies were conducted:

1. **Heritage in Hampi:** Historically, Dalit communities were denied entry into many sacred spaces in Hampi until the late 20th century. Even today, narratives within these sites focus on royal dynasties, architecture, and Brahminical traditions, with little acknowledgment of the contributions or spiritual practices of marginalized groups. The visual and textual interpretation within the UNESCO site largely excludes oral traditions and folklore from Dalit and tribal communities.

2. **Mysore Palace Tours:** Guided tours and public narratives around the Mysore Palace predominantly celebrate the Wodeyar kings and their male successors. Women's contributions, both within the royal household and in public life, are largely absent. Matrilineal communities in nearby Coorg and the role of royal women in local governance and patronage of the arts remain unrecognized in curated exhibits.

3. **Bangalore Museums:** A content analysis of major public museums in Bangalore, including the Government Museum and Visvesvaraya Industrial Museum, revealed under-representation of tribal, Dalit, and folk traditions. Museum panels heavily favor colonial and post-colonial elite contributions, with curated exhibits primarily designed through upper-caste urban lenses.

   These case studies illustrate how intersectional exclusion is woven into the symbolic and material fabric of heritage institutions.

## Recommendations

In light of these findings, several key recommendations are proposed to foster equity and inclusion in heritage discourse and practice:

1. **Develop Intersectional Heritage Education Modules:** Heritage studies should be integrated into school and college curricula through an intersectional lens, ensuring that students learn about contributions from diverse communities and understand historical power imbalances.

2. **Ensure Inclusive Representation in Heritage Planning Bodies:** Heritage institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), tourism boards, and museum curation teams must include representatives from marginalized communities, especially women, Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities.

3. **Document Oral Histories and Community Archives:** Government and academic bodies should support the creation of local oral history archives that capture the lived experiences, rituals, and resistance narratives of historically excluded communities.

4. **Design Gender-Inclusive and Accessible Heritage Spaces:** Site designs should incorporate safety features for women, accessibility ramps for disabled visitors, multilingual interpretive signage, and culturally appropriate facilities that consider gender and caste dynamics.

## Suggestions for Implementation

To implement these recommendations effectively, the following grassroots-level suggestions are offered:

- **Train Teachers and Educators:** Educators should be equipped with pedagogical tools to teach inclusive history that incorporates intersectional approaches, encouraging critical engagement rather than rote learning.

- **Introduce Inclusive Interpretation Panels:** Allocate specific funds for revising interpretation panels at museums and heritage sites to reflect the diverse history of Karnataka's communities.

- **Promote Participatory Heritage Management:** Encourage heritage committees at the local level to involve community elders, historians, women's collectives, and youth groups in the storytelling and management of heritage spaces.

- **Collaborate with NGOs and Artists:** NGOs and cultural practitioners should be supported to create participatory art, theatre, or folk-based installations at heritage events to reflect marginalized voices in public memory.

## Conclusion

This research reveals that cultural heritage, far from being a neutral or universally shared legacy, is often shaped by entrenched social hierarchies and power structures. Through statistical evidence and grounded case studies, the study demonstrates that intersectional identities profoundly influence how individuals engage with, feel represented in, and contribute to cultural heritage. The experiences of women, Dalits, and economically marginalized communities highlight the systemic exclusion inherent in heritage interpretation and policy.

The findings underscore an urgent need to reform how we think about, teach, and curate heritage in Karnataka and across India. Inclusive storytelling, participatory governance, and intersectional awareness are not optional add-ons but

foundational principles for building a just and reflective heritage ecosystem. Without such intentional inclusivity, cultural heritage risks becoming a selective narrative that validates the dominant and erases the struggles, wisdom, and contributions of the many. This study calls for a collective reimagining of heritage-one that listens to **voices** through **time**, especially those that history has long silenced.

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